

What happens when someone dies in space? Space tourism brings new legal and moral issues

January 10 2022, by Christopher Newman, Nick Caplan



Credit: Fabio Marciano from Pexels

Commercial spaceflight companies such as Virgin Galactic and Blue Origin are now offering exclusive opportunities for celebrities and

civilians to travel to space.

Traditionally, astronauts have been subject to [rigorous training](#) and medical scrutiny before going to [space](#), and the risk of death from [natural causes](#) was considered remote.

But in this new era of space tourism, it appears medical screening may not [be carried out](#), and only [minimal pre-flight training](#) provided.

With a wide variety of people now going to space, and the prospect in [the coming years](#) of humans establishing [bases on the Moon](#) and beyond, it raises an important question: what happens if someone [dies in space](#)?

Under [international space law](#), [individual countries](#) are responsible for authorizing and supervising all national space activity, whether governmental or private. In the United States, commercial tourist spaceflights require a license for launch to be issued by the [Federal Aviation Administration](#).

Should someone die on a commercial tourist [mission](#), there would need to be a determination as to the cause of death. If the death of a spaceflight participant was due to a mechanical fault in the spacecraft, the Federal Aviation Administration would look to suspend further launches by the company pending an investigation.

If [mechanical failure](#) is discounted, there would need to be consideration of the overall duty of care to all travelers by the commercial provider and assessment made about whether it did everything possible to prevent the person's death.

Uncomfortable but inevitable

The time spent in space on these tourist missions currently ranges from a

[few minutes](#) to a [few days](#). This means the risk of a death in space from natural causes is very low, though not impossible.

The question of what to do if someone dies in space will become significantly more pertinent—and complex—when humans embark on longer missions deeper into space, and even one day become permanently established in outer space.

Fundamentally, there will need to be some sort of investigative process put in place to establish the cause of death of humans in outer space. There have been inquests before, such as the inquiry into the [Columbia Shuttle disaster](#) in 2003, where Nasa's space shuttle Columbia disintegrated as it returned to Earth, killing the seven astronauts on board.

But these have been specialist investigations into high-profile accidents and concerned only US spaceflight. As opportunities for space travel expand, it's inevitable, either through accidents, illness or age, that deaths in space or on another [celestial body](#) will occur.



Commercial spaceflights are allowing more people to travel into space. Credit: [Blue Origin](#)

A formal procedure for investigating deaths on long-duration missions and space settlements will be necessary to ensure there is clear information on who died, the causes of death, and so lessons can be learned and possible patterns detected.

Many of the procedures associated with inquests and investigations could be imported from Earth. International space law provides [the default position](#) whereby a country that has registered a spacecraft has jurisdiction over that space object and any personnel. It's likely that a country with such jurisdiction would be the natural authority to commence an inquest and determine the procedures to deal with a death

in space.

While this is a useful starting point, an agreement tailored to the specific settlement or mission would probably be better. Planning a mission to space includes considering factors like power, food, protection against radiation and waste disposal. Establishing processes concerning what to do if a person dies, and incorporating these processes into any plan, will make a traumatic event slightly less so.

Having an agreement in place at the outset of a mission is even more important if there are a number of countries participating.

Practical considerations

In addition to the legal dimension, missions that send humans further into the Solar System will need to consider the physical disposal of human remains. Here it's important to take into account that different cultures treat their dead [in very different ways](#).

On short missions, it's likely the [body](#) would be brought back to Earth. The body would need to be preserved and stored to [avoid contamination](#) of the surviving crew.

On a round trip to Mars, which would be years in duration and may be a prospect in the coming decades, the body could possibly [be frozen](#) in the cold of space to reduce its weight and make it easier to store on its way back to Earth.

But if we start to colonize outer space, bodies may need to be disposed of rather than stored.

Although Star Trek fans may recall the way [Spock's body](#) was jettisoned into space, this probably wouldn't be desirable in real life. Countries may

object to having a human corpse floating in space, while the body itself may contribute to the growing issues created by [space debris](#). The family of the deceased might want their loved one's body returned to them.

Disposal of human remains on a colony is similarly fraught. The body of a settler buried on another planet may biologically contaminate that planet. Cremation is also likely to contaminate, and could be resource-intensive.

In time, there will undoubtedly be technical solutions to the storage and disposal of human remains in space. But the ethical issues around [death](#) in space cut across anthropological, legal and cultural boundaries. The idea may be uncomfortable to contemplate, but it's one of many conversations we will need to have as humans become a space-faring species.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: What happens when someone dies in space? Space tourism brings new legal and moral issues (2022, January 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-dies-space-tourism-legal-moral.html>

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